

Who's in Control ? — Promoting Autonomy in Required Courses —

Barry E. Keith

Abstract

This paper considers what it means to be an autonomous learner in a required course. During the first month of the course, the curriculum was negotiated with the students, including course goals, student options, choices over content, and assessment schemes. Students subscribe individually to a student newspaper, the *Asahi Weekly*, which is used as a base textbook and students compile portfolios to assess their learning. The effects of goal-setting are discussed and the implications for student motivation and autonomous learning considered.

Key words : 自律学習, autonomy, goal-setting, motivation

-- "I was able to do that I decided it by oneself (*sic*) and wanted to do it."

Student comment on "My Goal"

Introduction : Goal-Setting & 'Autonomy'

Humans are naturally curious about the world around them. We want to control our lives and we strongly dislike being forced to do something. Yet, society is based on rules and we often have to do things we do not want to. Such is the situation of a student in a required English course at university. What happens to student motivation if they are given more control and choice in a required course? This paper considers what it means to be an autonomous learner in a required language course.

The concept of autonomy in language learning has been evolving for over forty years. A pioneer in the field, Holec describes it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning."¹ Dickinson defines autonomy as learners having 'complete responsibility' for their learning.² Benson argues that 'control' is central to autonomy and more observable than notions of 'responsi-

bility.’³ Dörnyei provides a typography of the major developments in autonomous teaching and learning practices.⁴

In the Japanese university context, instructors often have a great deal of autonomy in making decisions over the goals, content and assessment schemes of their courses. Instructors are conventionally responsible for the curriculum, including theme, focus, course aims, textbooks, individual lesson plans, class format, and design of activities. Indeed, these are usually determined *solely* by the instructor. However, as Mackenzie and Fujioka argue that the issue of ‘student choice’ over goals, content, and assessment is essential.⁵ The definition of autonomy is undergoing constant change and is often reflected in the circumstances of particular teaching situations. There are many interpretations of what autonomy means, but as Mackenzie and Fujioka argue, autonomy itself is predicated on the question of choice. Their definition of autonomy is closest to my own in that *control* and *choice* are key concepts to promote students to become autonomous learners.

After all, you cannot direct something you have no control over and the main control mechanism is whether to choose to do something or not, and then making the choice of how to, and how well to do it.

(Mackenzie & Fujioka, 2002)

In the end, the teacher of a required language course cannot force students to learn if they are not interested in doing so. Thus, students who provide input into course goals and have some control over the curriculum and assessment become stakeholders in the learning process. If their interests are vested in the outcome of the course, they will more likely take the initiative and assume more responsibility for their own learning.

In motivation theories in psychology, Locke and Latham show the importance of establishing goals.⁶ They claim that humans act out of purpose, and having a firm commitment to a goal leads to higher performance. Mackenzie and Fujioka introduce a framework to promote autonomous learning through goal-setting activities, which were adapted for this study. The research question is, given more control over curriculum, choice of content, and assessment, do students become more motivated to learn? Students were solicited for feedback and both quantitative and qualitative results will be introduced and discussed.

Autonomy in My Teaching Context

As future engineers, my students need to be autonomous learners. As their teacher, I enjoy full autonomy in terms of course content and teaching materials. My courses focus on reading

skills, especially newspaper English. When students use authentic materials they focus on mastery of the content and not language itself. This has been shown to promote more learning.⁷ In addition, content is adapted to the learning goals of the students, thereby increasing their motivation. Finally, and most importantly for autonomy, newspapers promote independent learning by giving students control over their learning. The development of self-teaching skills that enable students to continue learning beyond my course is one of my most important goals as a teacher.

At the same time, my autonomy is restricted in a number of ways. The number of students in one class ranges from thirty to sixty. This severely limits the amount of individual attention each student receives. Classes meet once a week for ninety minutes and most importantly, English is a required subject. As a result, some students resent being forced to take English although it is not a required subject on the university entrance examination (according to qualitative feedback collected over two years). Students are therefore surprised to learn that not only is English required, it is the *lingua franca* of science and technology. Thus, a major aim of my course is to wake students out of their complacency and for them to take control of their learning. No longer are they studying English to pass an entrance exam; once they embark on a career in engineering, they enter a never-ending embrace with the world of information, where it is estimated that in some fields, up to 90% of scientific information exists in English.⁸

Participants

The subjects in this study are first- and second-year students who are majoring in four fields of engineering: chemistry, computer science, mechanical, and electrical engineering. There are 130 students in total, divided into four classes by their majors. Eighty-seven percent are male students.

Methodology : Course Goals, “My Goal” and Class Grades

In this section, I will discuss how the course goals, personal goals, and class grade percentages were determined. During the first week, the students were asked to think of the aims of the course. In other words, what did they feel the purpose of a required English course to be? In Mackenzie and Fujioka, this was done as a class discussion and brainstorming activity. In my class, however, students are extremely reluctant to share their opinions openly or lack the ability to express themselves in English. To overcome these difficulties, I used a creative problem-

solving technique known as the “KJ Method.” The method is named after cultural anthropologist Kawakita Jiro, who developed the technique during his field-work.⁹ It is a type of brainstorming in which participants write ideas on pieces of paper that are later categorized. First, students were distributed several small pieces of paper. Prompted with “what are the purposes of this course?” students brainstormed individually for five minutes and wrote their ideas on their papers. Students were asked to keep one idea to each sheet of paper. Students were encouraged to write in English, but allowed to use Japanese if they felt more comfortable doing so. At the end of five minutes, the papers were collected, randomly sorted and then redistributed. Students read their papers and confirmed the meaning. Then the instructor read one card aloud and students with similar cards raised their hands, reading their cards aloud in turn. The ideas were then put on the board and ideas in Japanese were translated to English. This process was repeated until all ideas were expressed, i.e. all the papers had been accounted for. The result is a categorized mind-map that is student-generated. This mind-map was shown to the students the following week for confirmation (see Figure 1). As can be seen, the students have a great variety of learning goals. The purpose of this stage is to promote student awareness of goals and understand the strategies to achieve them, but also to provide the instructor with a framework for course content and activities.

Once the course goals were established, students were then asked to formulate personal learning goals as a written homework assignment. Students wrote their personal goals in English and translated them into Japanese for confirmation. The students’ individual learning goals were self-evaluated using a self-assessment sheet. The instructor discussed student goals

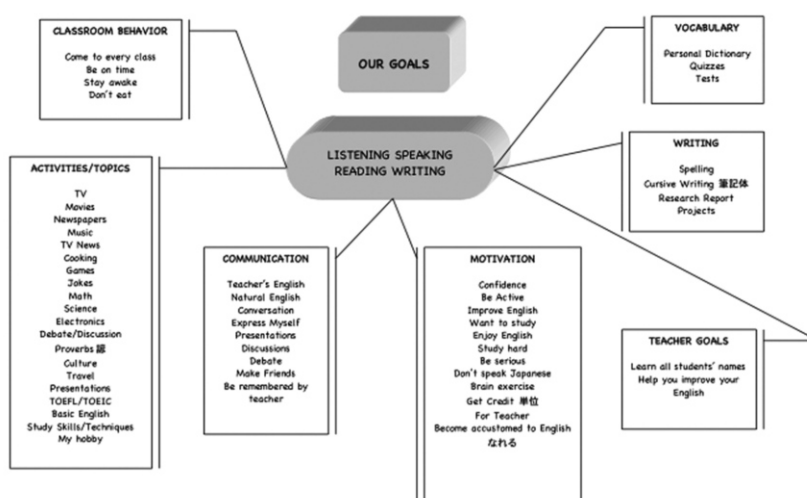


Figure 1 Mind-Map of Course Goals

with each student in 5-minute mini-conferences over the course of the semester. Students reflected on their goals and were free to revise them as needed based on instructor feedback or personal preferences. I also showed the class my efforts to learn Chinese and stressed the importance of goal-setting, e.g. taking a standardized test to test language proficiency.

Finally, in a class discussion, students were asked to consider their grade percentages for the course. Using the framework in Mackenzie and Fujioka, I asked students to assign percentages in three categories: ongoing projects (“My Goal”), in-class activities, and a final test. Students came up with percentages individually shared those in groups of fours, and then a group percentage was agreed upon by the students. These were compiled on the board and averaged. A Yes/No vote was conducted for final approval and discussion of points of contention.

Results

Self-Assessment of “My Goal”

In the self-evaluation sheet, students were asked to reflect on the “My Goal” task and assess their performances. Self-assessments from 89 students were collected and categorized according to their levels of interest in the personal goal-setting activity and then again on according to their rating of difficulty, as below.

My Goal Self-Assessment	Mean	SD
This was (Boring 0 1 2 3 4 5 Interesting)	3.21	1.21
This was (Easy 0 1 2 3 4 5 Difficult)	3.16	1.32

Students were also asked to provide reasons for their choices as open-ended questions. Selected comments are given below. I translated comments in Japanese to English, but left the English in their original forms. The language is indicated with (J) and (E), respectively.

<p>This was (5: interesting) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) When I completed the sentence translation, I was excited ● (J) I read Asahi Weekly articles aloud. ● (E) I was able to do that I decided it by oneself and wanted to do it. ● (J) Because I understood the content. ● (E) Overcame about my big dream with TOEFL.
<p>This was (4: interesting) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) I reached my goal. ● (E) I came across many words I don't understand. ● (E) My hobby is listening music and this is not formal. ● (E) I learned different things and unknown culture. ● (E) I can decide my own goal. ● (J) It increased my motivation (<i>yaruki ga deta</i>).

<p>This was (3 : interesting) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) I had to check the dictionary a lot to write a diary in English. ● (J) I don't feel motivated to do anything just by myself. ● (J) I set my goal a little too high perhaps but I think it would be good to read a book in English so I will give it a try. ● (J) I thought I would try harder because I made the goal but I didn't try as hard as I thought I would. ● (J) I thought making a goal by myself was a good thing.
<p>This was (2 : boring) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (E) It was the basic grammar's lesson. ● (E) I don't learn words. ● (J) I just memorized the words without any special way. ● (E) I tried to learn some words which is little relationship between each other. ● (E) This newspaper is difficult
<p>This was (1 : boring) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (E) I don't look up the words. ● (J) I had no motivation. ● (J) It was not challenging. ● (E) Only writing.
<p>This was (0 : boring) because</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (E) I don't like English. ● (J) I didn't feel motivated. It felt like "studying."

Students were also asked to rate the difficulty, and give reasons

<p>This was (5 : difficult) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) There are so many words that I don't know that I had to use a dictionary and even then it was difficult to follow the meaning. ● (E) Talking is very fast. I must watching movie repeat. ● (J) It took a lot of time to find out how to express Japanese expressions (like '<i>nakanaka</i>') in English. ● (E) To speak I have to get more opportunities of using English ● (J) In order to memorize many words, studying every day is essential.
<p>This was (4 : difficult) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) So many words I don't know. ● (J) I'm not good at memorizing. ● (J) I thought I would try harder, but since I didn't, it turned out to be more difficult than I thought. ● (J) I couldn't find something that suited me. ● (J) It's hard to continue doing something every day. ● (J) I don't read well, so my goal to read a whole book was too difficult. ● (J) It was difficult to get a specific goal : how do I reach my goal, and what is the level that I want to achieve ? ● (E) I couldn't understand what to do. ● (J) Because I haven't got into a routine, I forgot to study.

<p>This was (3 : difficult) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) My goal is not too big ; it is achievable. ● (E) Melody is very easy. But, the lyrics is difficult. ● (E) Not too easy, not too difficult, I feel. ● (E) The effort is adequate volume to negotiate the TOEIC text book. ● (J) I only read the newspaper.
<p>This was (2 : easy) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (J) Because all I did was write down and memorize the words. ● (J) It was just the right level. ● (J) I didn't study very difficult words. ● (J) I can remember the words, but when I write them I make many small mistakes. ● (E) I can use electronic dictionary.
<p>This was (1 : easy) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (E) I knowed this week's word. ● (J) There were few difficult words. ● (E) It was the movie which I got used to. ● (E) Those words are level one of Data Base 4500. ● (J) It's just memorization. ● (J) Remembering one or two words a day was relatively easy.
<p>This was (0 : easy) because :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (E) It matched my ability. ● (E) I thought I wanted to achieve this goal long long ago.

Questionnaire

To evaluate the goal-setting process, students were administered a questionnaire consisting of 15 statements using a 4-point Likert scale. Students were asked to agree or disagree with the statements, written in English and Japanese, designed to investigate the effect of the goal-setting and their motivation. I examined the results of the questionnaires using descriptive statistics. I was most interested in learning if there was a relationship between the setting of course goals, personal goals, and determining grading percentages and students' motivation.

Questionnaire Responses : Student Attitudes

1=strongly disagree
全くそう思わない

2=disagree
そう思わない

3=agree
そう思う

4=strongly agree
全くその通りである

Class Goals について	Mean	SD
1. I understand why we set goals. なぜクラス目標を設定したか理解している	2.97	.72
2. I know what our class goals are. クラス目標は何か理解している	2.72	.73
3. Having a class goal encourages me to try harder. クラス目標があるので努力するよう促される	2.93	.73
4. Setting a class goal was useful and valuable. クラス目標を設定することは役に立ち、価値があった	3.08	.66
5. Having a class goal increases student motivation. クラス目標があると学生のやる気が出る	3.01	.66
My Goal について		
6. I understand why I set personal goals. なぜ自己目標を設定したか理解している	3.45	.59
7. I know what my personal goal is. 自己目標は何か理解している	3.66	.54
8. Having a personal goal encourages me to try harder. 自己目標があるので努力するよう促される	3.20	.70
9. Setting a personal goal was useful and valuable. 自己目標を設定することは役に立ち、価値があった	3.23	.75
10. Having a personal goal increases my motivation. 自己目標があるとやる気が出る	3.14	.80
Grading % について		
11. I understand why we set grade %. なぜ成績の評価基準を設定したか理解している	3.12	.71
12. I know what our grade % are. 成績の評価基準を理解している	3.31	.65
13. Setting our grade % encourages me to try harder. 自分たちで成績の評価基準を設定すると努力するよう促される	3.28	.65
14. Setting our grade % was useful and valuable. 成績の評価基準を設定することは役に立ち、価値があった	3.20	.67
15. Setting our grade % increases my motivation. 学生による成績の評価基準があるとやる気が出る	3.26	.72

The questionnaire was developed from a university questionnaire created by Evans Nachi.¹⁰ Questionnaires for one hundred students were collected. The table shows that students seem satisfied with the goal-setting exercise. The mean for all items except 1-3 are above 3.00, meaning that students agree, and showing that students' motivation was positively affected. Statements 1-3 also are very close to 3.00 and thus indicate positive attitudes. Statement 7 has the overall highest mean, 3.66, and this shows that students have a strong understanding of their own goals. However, the students' understanding of the course goals is lower. One reason for this is that the course goals were brainstormed and shown to the students the following week. I did not distribute handouts, so this point must be clarified in the future by either giving the students a printed version or having them write the goals in their notebooks. Finally, at 3.26, students felt that setting the class grading percentage to be the most motivating and that doing so encouraged them to try harder, 3.28.

Discussion

Use of the KJ method generated clear goals. Not only is the method effective to brainstorm many ideas in a short time, the activity reinforces student ownership of the course curriculum. What is less clear, however, is whether students had a grasp of what the goals were and how they would be achieved. This is one aspect where I diverged from Mackenzie and Fujioka, in that I did not ask the students to write out, display and observe the course goals. Time should be allotted for this activity in the future.

In terms of "My Goal", students generally felt interested in this activity, but they also felt it was difficult. Why was it interesting but difficult? Student responses reveal patterns. While many students enjoyed the freedom of formulating a personal goal, others were frustrated by lacking a clear goal or not knowing how to achieve it. Another problem was setting unrealistic goals. Students had difficulty finding appropriate study materials in terms of interest and ability. Finally, time management, maintaining motivation and self-discipline were common obstacles. Some felt their success or failure in learning English would be determined by will power alone. Student interest in learning English is high, but students are less sure of *how* to go about learning. Those who complained that the activity was boring tended to fall back on familiar but tedious study habits such as memorizing word lists. These results would indicate that students could benefit from some training in learner strategies.

Conclusion

This study shows that when given the opportunity to have input in curricular matters, students' motivation is positively affected. As stakeholders, students are vested in the outcome of a course. Through various goal-setting activities, students have taken first steps toward becoming autonomous learners. Having defined goals, both for the course and individually, increased encouraged the students to try harder. Even in required courses, students enjoy having more choice and control over their learning.

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自律した学生への道

ー 必須科目「英語」における自律学習の導入・試みと 学生のモチベーションについて ー

ベアリー・E・キース

本稿は、必須科目である「英語」における学生の自律学習者への過程を取り上げる。授業の初期段階にカリキュラムを学生同士と教員との話し合いのもとで設定し、成績評価基準や学生自身の自己目標設定が行うものである。よって、この手法で学生の学習意欲にどのような影響があったかを、検証する。